

This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials related to the *McCormick Row House District*, prepared for the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks by its staff.



**CITY OF CHICAGO**

Richard J. Daley, Mayor

**COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL  
AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS**

Samuel A. Lichtmann, Chairman

Barnet Hodes, Vice-Chairman

Ira J. Bach, Secretary

John W. Baird

Joseph Benson

Jerome R. Butler, Jr.

Ruth Moore Garbe

Lewis W. Hill

Harold K. Skramstad, Jr.

William M. McLenahan, Director

Room 800

320 North Clark Street

Chicago, Illinois 60610

(312) 744-3200

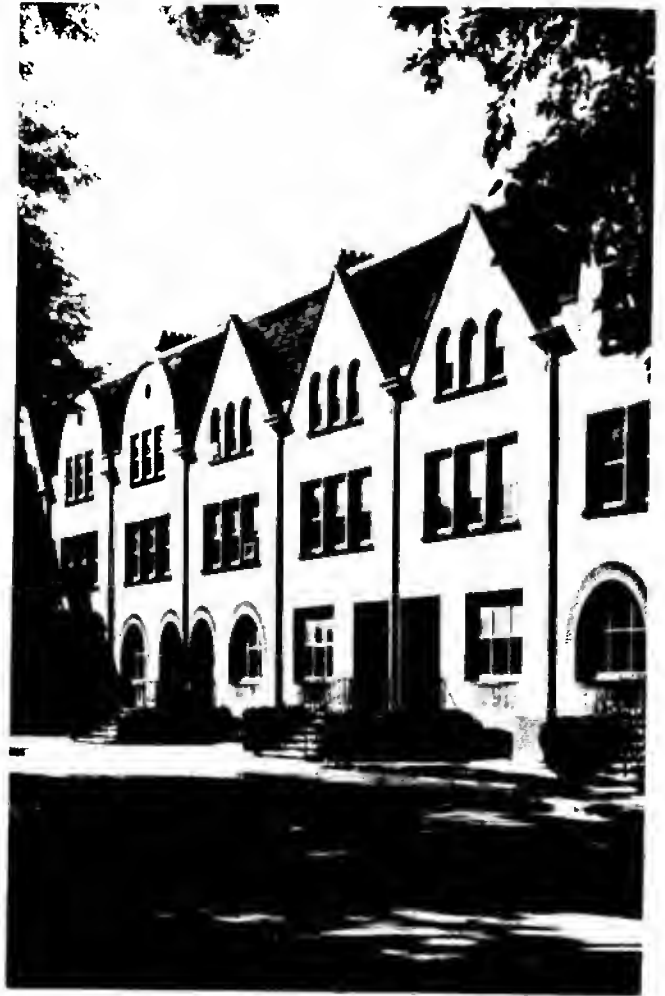
Printed U.S.A./April 1976

View of McCormick Seminary in the 1880s from the intersection of Halsted Street, Fullerton, and Lincoln avenues. (Courtesy of the McCormick Theological Seminary)

# MCCORMICK ROW HOUSE DISTRICT

*Office Copy*

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS



Row houses along Chalmers Place.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

## **MCCORMICK ROW HOUSE DISTRICT**

In 1863, McCormick Theological Seminary began development of its campus on Chicago's North Side in an area bounded by Belden and Fullerton avenues, Halsted Street, and the elevated tracks. Two decades later the seminary developed row houses on the campus as a vehicle for investing its endowment. At the time it was a novel solution to an even more novel situation: for the first time in forty years the institution was not threatened with insolvency, but actually had money to invest.

The McCormick Theological Seminary was founded in 1829 as the Indiana Theological Seminary, an adjunct to the Presbyterian-affiliated Hanover Academy. Hanover Academy (now known as Hanover College) had begun two years earlier in the southern Indiana town of Hanover. The seminary separated from the academy in 1840 and moved to New Albany, Indiana, where it became the New Albany Theological Seminary. By the mid-1850s another move was pending.

The early history of the seminary is closely tied to struggles within its parent denomination, the Presbyterian Church, and to the alternating support and neglect of its chief patron, Cyrus Hall McCormick.

The Presbyterian Church suffered a doctrinal schism in 1837, its membership dividing ideologically into what were called the Old and New schools. The Old School was being further divided by the issues that were leading the nation into civil war; prominent among them was the question of slavery. In an 1845 declaration, the General Assembly of the Old School stated that "since Christ and his inspired Apostles did not make the holding of slaves a bar to communion, we, as a court of Christ, have no authority to do so....we have no authority to legislate on the subject." This posed a crisis of conscience within the church membership: was slavery just a political issue or was it a moral one as well?

One prominent Presbyterian who had very strong feelings about this question was Cyrus Hall McCormick, the inventor of the reaper. McCormick was born in Virginia on February 15, 1809. It was there that he invented and perfected the reaper during the 1830s; he moved to Chicago in 1847. His attitudes were those of a well-to-do Virginian of middle years: anti-abolitionist, conservative in both politics and religion—a staunch, "stand pat" member of the Democratic Party and a Presbyterian of the Old School.

Distressed by the state of the Union, McCormick felt that salvation lay in conservative policies; he believed that preserving the status quo would save the Union. Toward this end he directed his energy and money. He published a newspaper and a religious magazine, and soon supported a seminary in the Northwest Territory "with the view to strengthen the national religious influence there, as opposed to the sectional, or radical influence, and thus so far to promote the stability of the Union."

By 1856, McCormick was aware of the jeopardy in which the New Albany Seminary found itself: short of students and funds, its closing was inevitable. In November, the directors of the seminary met in Chicago to seek support of leading churchmen here. As a result of this meeting, a board of directors was elected to supervise an as-yet unlocated and unendowed Presbyterian Seminary of the Northwest. McCormick, determined to have this seminary in Chicago, used his influence and money to secure the transfer of the New Albany school, for, as he wrote his brother, it would be of "importance to the cause." The seminary at New Albany closed after its 1857 commencement.

At Chicago, Paul Cornell and others donated land in Hyde Park (then a Chicago suburb) and planning for the seminary's reopening began. Money was scarce, but the agent for the board of trustees "spent more than the contributions received, and employed an architect [Gurdon P.

Randall], at a fee of \$1600, to design a seminary to cost \$200,000!" Not only the pipe-dreaming agent, but also the panic of 1857 and disputes between conservative and radical leaders of the church, put an end to the Hyde Park plan by 1858. In the meantime, the abolitionist faction tendered an offer: \$10,000 and ten acres of land in Indianapolis, in return for espousing the abolitionist cause.

McCormick wrote: "My opinion then was that the peace of the Country was greatly threatened by the agitation of that question [slavery]; and that, to keep that agitation out of the Church so far as possible was an important means for the preservation of the Union, as well as for the peace of the Church." To counter the Indianapolis bid and secure a Chicago seminary—one that would promote a conservative, Old School Presbyterian viewpoint—McCormick acted. He proposed in the spring of 1859 to endow four professorships at \$25,000 each, provided that the church's 1845 position of non-involvement be upheld, that the administration of the seminary be changed, and that it be located in Chicago. To strengthen McCormick's bid, William B. Ogden and his partner Joseph C. Sheffield offered twenty acres of land at Fullerton and Halsted, and William Lill and Michael Diversey, brewers, offered an additional, non-adjacent five acres.

The General Assembly of the church voted overwhelmingly to accept McCormick's offer. After a day-to-day existence for thirty years, the seminary would have a generous

Engraving of Cyrus Hall McCormick from Moses and Kirkland's *History of Chicago*, published in 1895.



endowment and a permanent home by moving to Chicago. In the autumn of 1859, the Presbyterian Seminary of the Northwest opened in an old hotel at the southwest corner of Clark and Harrison streets, Chicago. McCormick made his gift conditionally, as did the land donors who stipulated that "substantial brick and stone buildings for seminary purposes should be erected on the grounds within a certain time...." [May, 1861].

Civil war broke out in April, 1861. McCormick's cause quickly lost support in the Northwest. This was reflected in the general lack of support for his seminary. In May, the General Assembly of the church met in Philadelphia with the radical faction predominating. Rescinding the position taken in 1845, the church reminded the conservative faction that "there are occasions when political questions rise into the sphere of morals and religion....Would you have us recognize, as good Presbyterians, men whom our own government, with approval of Christendom, may soon execute as traitors?" Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the assembly decided "that slavery was contrary to the will of God...." Thus, the church finally adopted secular policies in defining its religious ones.

McCormick's support for the seminary waned as he saw his hopes vanish. Even within the seminary the abolitionist's cause was advancing. Finally he left the seminary to struggle on its own. The war proved troublesome for fundraisers as well as consciences. The land donors were persuaded to extend their offer. The deadline for constructing "substantial brick and stone buildings" came and went, yet the acreage remained, as a contemporary noted, "grass pastures and cabbage patches." Through much effort, Fielding H. Ewing raised sufficient funds (mostly in New York) to begin construction in May, 1863. This first building,

Gurdon P. Randall's 1861 edition of *Designs and Illustrations*, which he published to promote his architectural practice, illustrates the Hyde Park plan for the Presbyterian Seminary of the Northwest, designed in 1857. It was in an English Gothic style; housed a chapel, library, classrooms, dormitories, and professors' residences; and was to be built of Athens marble, a period term for lamont stone, a limestone quarried in Lamont, Illinois.  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



Ewing Hall, opened in February, 1864, thus securing title to the land. The future of the seminary had somewhat brightened.

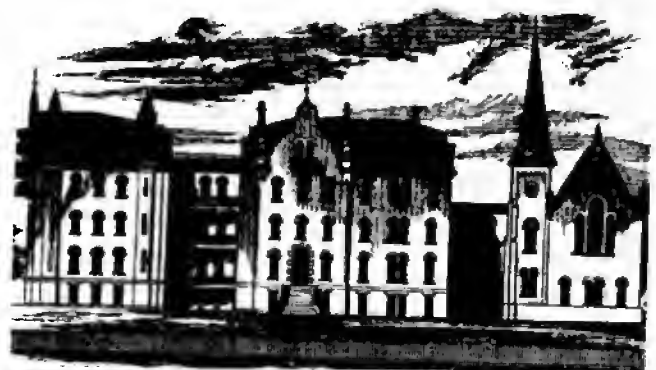
After the war, the nation turned to reconstruction. The slavery issue was settled and the Union, the seminary, and Mr. McCormick had endured. Conservative Old School Presbyterianism still needed a champion, and once again McCormick saw the need to support and direct the seminary to this end. The seminary again had a patron.

The post-war decades saw the seminary prosper as political and theological disputes resolved themselves. The Chicago Fire spared the institution. In 1875 the chapel was constructed, and in 1884 McCormick Hall was built. Lack of professors' housing on the grounds proved a handicap in securing the proper men for the faculty. Free housing would also complement the professors' salaries and thereby reduce the amount of cash required to attract competent men. In 1881, McCormick funded the construction of four houses at a cost of \$9,000 each. These were completed by 1884.

The seminary again hired Gurdon P. Randall as architect. Much of the design work had been completed as early as 1861, in preparation for the building of Ewing Hall. An illustration of the seminary buildings, much as they were later built, appears in Randall's *Architecture, Designs and Illustrations* for 1866. The buildings for the North Side site were quite similar in function to those for the earlier Hyde Park plan, although the form had substantially changed; English gothic spires gave way to Dutch gables and Athens marble was replaced by red brick. The design was scaled down, no doubt, to reflect a more realistic appraisal of the financial situation.

Cyrus Hall McCormick died on May 13, 1884, five months before the formal dedication of McCormick Hall and Gurdon P. Randall died on September 20, 1884, shortly after the dedication. The annual catalogue of the semi-

Published in 1866, this drawing shows the seminary much as it was subsequently built. Ewing Hall is in the center; the chapel is to the right; and McCormick Hall is to the left.  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)





1890s view to the southwest from the intersection of Halsted Street with Fullerton and Lincoln avenues. One of the 1884 professor's houses is at left; Fowler Hall is to the right.  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

nary for 1884-1885 describes their campus and the three attached buildings (the chapel and Ewing and McCormick halls) that composed the seminary:

The Seminary Building has recently been enlarged by the addition of "McCormick Hall," an elegant structure containing rooms for 50 students, with study and lodging room for each. It is located on Halsted Street, between Fullerton and Belden avenues, and is surrounded by ample and attractive grounds. The entire building contains a Chapel, Library, Lecture Rooms, Reading Room, Parlor, Dormitories, Refectory, Bath Rooms with hot and cold water; together with all the modern conveniences and improvements. This building and the four professor's houses, recently erected, represent a value of \$175,000, for which sum, at least four-fifths is due to the generosity of the Seminary's munificent patron the late Hon. Cyrus Hall McCormick. For the furnishing of these rooms the Seminary is indebted to the liberality of churches and individuals.

As early as 1881, it had been proposed to rename the seminary to honor its patron. In a letter of September 2, 1881, McCormick wrote: "The idea that the seminary should bear my name did not originate with me, and has never been 'a cherished thought of mine.'" In 1886, the Presbyterian Seminary of the Northwest became McCormick Theological Seminary.

With McCormick's death, his wife, Nettie Fowler McCormick, and their son, Cyrus Hall McCormick, Jr., took over the role of patron. They actively pursued the course set by the senior McCormick in the development of the seminary. In 1886 they funded the construction of another dormitory, to be named Fowler Hall in honor of Mrs. McCormick.

Fowler Hall was designed by A. Page Brown, a pupil of McKim, Mead and White who later established an architectural reputation for himself in San Francisco. Fowler Hall was the largest of the seminary's buildings. It was designed in a Romanesque revival style, a departure from the early Dutch mode established by Randall.

In 1881-1882 the seminary had begun a review of its investment policies. Up until then the endowment had been loaned out at varying interest rates: 10% in 1859, but dropping to below 7% by 1880. Although the endowment was safely invested, its return was decreasing as the financial needs of the seminary were increasing. The directors decided to borrow directly from the endowment and to proceed to develop the seminary's property with rental units.

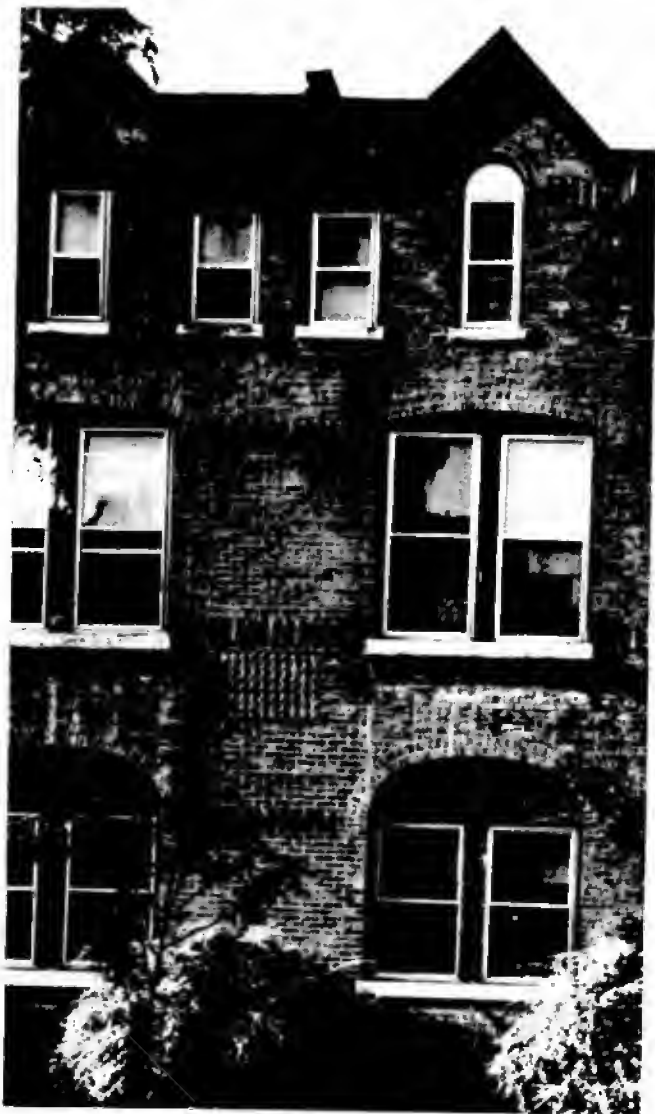
In *A History of the McCormick Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church* (1893), LeRoy Jones Halsey assessed this policy:

In a few years fifty-one dwelling houses for rent were erected, and the bulk of the endowment money was thus employed. The wisdom of the policy was fully illustrated by the fact that every house was rented as soon as built to first-class tenants, the whole improvement yielding for the current expenses of the institution a sure and remunerative income of between eight and ten per cent on the funds thus used. These fine residences served the purpose also of drawing a substantial and intelligent class of Christian and Presbyterian families to the immediate neighborhood of the Seminary, and of contributing greatly to the material prosperity as well as to the educational and moral development of that part of the city. The wisdom of the original donors of the land in helping to found such a school, was now abundantly seen in the greatly increased value of all the real estate and the substantial character of the whole population belonging to that vicinity.

Row houses along Belden Avenue.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)







This detail shows a variety of Queen Anne elements which mark the design of the Belden and Fullerton avenue row houses: irregular roof lines with gables and dormers; round-headed windows; decorative brick panels; and stained-glass transoms.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

In the summer of 1882, construction began on a row of six houses along Montana Street, on part of land given by Lill and Diversey. The following summer, nine more row houses were constructed on Dunning Street (today called Altgeld), also part of the Lill-Diversey property. The following year work began on the seminary grounds proper.

In the annual catalogue of 1884-1885, under the heading of "Corporate Structure," it is mentioned for the first time that with each donation of \$3,000, the seminary would set aside one building lot, using the donation to construct a rental unit upon it. The unit would be named in honor of the donor, and would yield between 10% and 15% on the investment. By 1890-1891 the donation had been raised to \$5,000 and the yield lowered to between 8% and 10%.

The architect for these row houses was the firm of A. M. F. Colton and Son. Colton was born around 1823 and worked in Chicago until his death in 1896. Aside from the seminary's rental houses, he had been involved in the planning of Ewing Hall, the chapel, and Fowler Hall. His offices were in the Reaper Block at the northeast corner of Washington and Clark streets, a building Cyrus Hall McCormick developed in 1873 with John Mills Van Osdel as architect.

An undated book of presentation drawings with the signature of A. M. F. Colton and Son shows the floor plans of the sixty-four rental units they designed. The houses were all designed at about the same time although their construction took several years. The first rows were built closest to the institutional buildings, along the eastern ends of Belden and Fullerton avenues.

These row houses are stylistically similar to the older institutional buildings by Randall. They are in a rather simplified Queen Anne style with fronts of red brick trimmed in sandstone. The six surviving rows (two were demolished in 1958) are all quite similar except for their top stories (two appear to have been added on to at a later date). Here they exhibit varying treatments: gables, dormers, false mansards, and hip roofs, shingled with slate. The houses are set on high foundations, with a variety of ornate iron hand-rails decorating the stairways. The windows are contained under brick arches and on the first story are enhanced with stained- or cut-glass transoms. Much of the brick work is decorative, creating ornate panels and stringcourses.

In the late 1880s work began on the row houses fronting Chalmers Place, a unique residential street surrounding a small, private park much like eighteenth-century London terraces and squares.

The architect was A. M. F. Colton and Son, although Mrs. McCormick was very much involved in the planning of this block. Stella Roderick in her biography of Mrs. McCormick describes the development of Chalmers Place:

To each building in addition to money she had given uncounted hours in consultation with architects, builders, Seminary committee, furnishers, and in personal inspection, out of which came many a sound criticism or wise suggestion on her part. Those who knew her ways closely have said, with pardonable exaggeration, that she knew every stick and brick in any building that she gave....

Chalmers Place owes its existence to her....Mrs. McCormick and Cyrus (Jr.) contributed from the estate both the amount of the deficit for the year 1888-1889 and \$100,000 to build fifteen houses [eighteen were eventually built]. The plan for arranging them on either side of a parked street was Mrs. McCormick's. So were, if not actually the designs, at least the general plan and many details of the houses. And the good old Presbyterian name of Chalmers was her choice.

Her interest was not confined to the houses either. The private street was to be made beautiful and Mrs. McCormick, always a lover of trees, elected herself to the task. Upon a wintry day her carriage drove up to the door of No. 10 Chalmers



The end row houses on Chalmers Place are further accented by turrets with conical roofs.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

Place [840 Chalmers Place, today]. It was accompanied by a large dray loaded with sizable trees. As she went up the front steps her coachman walked beside her carrying a pair of immensely tall rubber boots. In Jessie Harvey Robinson's parlor she put them on and announced that she was going to superintend the planting. As she had only one pair of boots she would not allow Mrs. Robinson to go out with her. All that morning she stood there in the snow, erect and graceful, in her incongruous boots until she had seen the roots safely placed where she meant them to be.

Chalmers Place is located between the Belden and Fullerton avenue row houses and what would be the extension of Dayton and Fremont streets. These row houses joined a fifth professor's residence constructed in 1889 at the northeast entrance (No. 834) of Chalmers Place. Around 1895, one of the 1884 professor's houses was moved to the southeast entrance of Chalmers Place (No. 835), when its original site was chosen for the Virginia Library. This library, a Greek revival style building, was designed by Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, the architects of the Chicago Public Library.

The Chalmers Place row houses differ greatly from the earlier ones. Their style is akin to Fowler Hall, which was designed by Brown in a Romanesque revival style. They are more simply and severely treated: constructed of brown brick trimmed in brownstone, their fronts form a continu-



The relocated 1884 professor's house is the oldest structure in the McCormick Row House District.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

ous, broad, flat plane with deeply recessed window and door openings. Each end house has a corner turret. The roofline is enlivened by a symmetrical pattern of round and triangular gables.

After the completion of Chalmers Place no new construction occurred on campus until 1929, the centennial of the seminary's founding. To celebrate the occasion, plans to rebuild the seminary were drawn by the architect Dwight G. Wallis. Interestingly enough, the architect, in essence, revived Gurdon P. Randall's original Hyde Park scheme of 1857. The seminary was to be Collegiate Gothic in style; this style had been used successfully at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park. The new scheme called for the demolition of the existing campus; it was to be entirely rebuilt except for the Virginia Library.

Chiefly through Mrs. McCormick's bequest, work began on this scheme. The commons, enclosing the west end of Chalmers Place, and the gymnasium, abutting the CTA elevated tracks, were begun in 1929. Fortunately, the remainder of this plan went unrealized and the original seminary buildings were spared. Thus the commons and the gymnasium are the sole reminders of this ambitious centennial plan.

Around 1940, the three 1884 professor's houses that fronted on Halsted Street were demolished to create a front lawn for the seminary. In 1950, a dormitory was built behind 901-927 Fullerton Avenue. The two westernmost rows on Belden Avenue were demolished in 1958 to make room for additional student housing and parking.

During the 1960s the original institutional buildings were demolished and replaced by new structures. Ewing Hall was demolished in 1962, the chapel in 1962, McCormick Hall in 1960, Fowler Hall in the mid-1960s, and the Virginia Library in 1963.

By 1973, the seminary, due to economic pressures, decided to affiliate with the theological seminaries connected with the University of Chicago. Thus, as was envisioned by

McCormick and Cornell in 1857, the McCormick Theological Seminary is now located in Hyde Park. This move raised the question of what was to become of the seminary's North Side row houses?

In 1974, a group of McCormick row house tenants formed the Seminary Townhouse Association and began to devise a method of purchasing the seminary's row houses. The Seminary Townhouse Association found prospective buyers for all of the seminary's fifty-eight residential units and tendered an offer to purchase that property developed by McCormick for residential use; this offer was accepted by the seminary. Title to the property has since been transferred to the individual row house owners, with covenants delineating the treatment and maintenance of building exteriors and public areas under the guidance of the Seminary Townhouse Association. The row houses will be uniformly treated in keeping with the original plans of the owners and architect and as they have been over the past century.

With its future safely secured, the McCormick Row House District will continue to be a unique part of a much larger North Side neighborhood providing family housing in the inner city. One of the most striking features of the seminary's row houses is their size. They all have an inordinate number of bedrooms per unit, varying between six and eight for each house (no doubt students once were boarded in these houses). This, combined with the park-like setting of Chalmers Place and a consistent and uniform treatment of the exteriors, will assure their continued usefulness as family dwellings and their architectural integrity as fine examples of nineteenth-century residential architecture (adapted to contemporary use) and city planning. Certainly, they are a credit to and a reminder of the institution that brought them about: McCormick Theological Seminary.

**The eastern row of four rows located along Fullerton Avenue is similar to those on Balden Avenue.**  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

